

Ghalib's new ambassador

We understand what is Urdu, the entire world knows our language', said Daghl Dehlvi.

There couldn't have been a better couplet to introduce *Urdu Hai Jiska Naam*, a literary programme on India's first Urdu Channel, UTN (Urdu Television Network), launched recently. A symbol of India's *Ganga-Jamni tehzeeb* (composite culture), Urdu has a large following, who cut across barriers of caste, creed and region. Politicians sing paens to its secular *mijaz* (character), while poets have penned tomes on its mellifluousness. Yet Urdu has suffered immensely in the pre and post-partition Indian subcontinent. It is against this backdrop that an Urdu channel and a programme dedicated to the language's classical poets comes a whiff of fresh air.

Contrary to the opening couplet of *Urdu Hai Jiska Naam*, it was surprising that UTN chose actress Zarina Wahab as an anchor. Wahab herself was "amused" when the channel approached her with the offer. "I come from Vishakhapatnam and my mother tongue is Telugu. I can speak Urdu, but I don't have command over the language," she says. So, how did she agree to present a programme which is based on the giants of Urdu poetry? "When the programme's director Shilpa Vaswani called me up I told her my pronunciation was *kharab*. She liked the way I pronounced the word *kharab* and was adamant on signing me on as an anchor," she says, adding that the channel went a step ahead: it appointed a *maulvi* to teach her Urdu. "On the sets, a whole lot of people assist me. I rehearse difficult words many times before the shot is canned."

The programme as such is divided into three parts — *Urdu Hai Jiska*

Mohammed Wajihuddin meets Zarina Wahab and discovers that she is taking Urdu lessons from a maulvi to anchor a show on the great Urdu poets of yesteryears

Naam, Adabi Cocktail and Mushaira. Urdu Hai Jiska Naam tells the story of 13 classical poets from Wali Dakni (a poet during the reigns of Shah Jehan-Aurangzeb) to Daghl Dehlvi, who passed away in 1905. In *Adbi Cocktail*, a guest from the world of music or poetry introduces a couplet of a known

poet and discusses its context, structure and significance. Since *Mushaira* is part of the rich poetic traditions in Urdu, it finds a place in UTN's programme where poets recite their ghazals.

Nida Fazli, who scripted *Urdu...* and also proposed Wahab's name, says: "Zarina has a pleasing personality. She

has worked hard on the language and has acquired a perfect pronunciation. I thought she would be the right choice and do justice to the programme". Fazli was not off the mark.

A week after the programme went on air, Wahab was flooded with congratulatory calls and letters. "People

have liked me and the programme. The initial response is encouraging," she says.

Starting with *Chit Chor*, Wahab has acted in a number of Hindi films like *Ghrona*, *Savan Ko Ane Do*, *Sitara*, *Agar and Ek Aur Ek Gyarah*. She has worked in Malayalam cinema as well, and has been paired with actors like Kamal Hasan and Mammootty. Of late, she has turned to television and acted in serials like *Naya Zamana* (Zee TV) and *Agni* (DD 2). Her serial *Supriya* is currently running on SABe TV. So, how does anchoring differ from acting? "When you act, you are dictated more by the script and don't have much scope for experimentation. As an anchor, however, one can set a tone for the programme — much of the programme's success depends on that. It's more difficult," she admits.

And she knows how to meet the challenge. A quick learner, Wahab knows how to slip into the skin of a role. Her ability to learn the ropes quickly could be gauged by the fact that before she signed on this anchoring assignment she couldn't even count beyond '30' in Hindi.

And now she utters difficult couplets like the one by Wali: *lab ki sifat laale badul n su kahunga/wahshi hain tere ghazala su kahunga* (Your lips are as the precious stone of badul — a place in the Arab world — of which eyes are luscious like those of deer).

"I accepted this so because I like Urdu. It is a beautiful language in which you can express delicate thoughts easily. I am enjoying it," she says. The language of Ghalib, Meer, Iqbal, Fiaz and Faiz has found a new ambassador who may not have right credentials to be *Ucca Urduwalla* but her intentions are genuine.



VASANT PRABHU